Dixon Springs Experimental Station

Devon Romano
Carbondale Community High School, Carbondale
Teacher: Patricia Grimmer

Imagine what it would be like to live on eroded land that was incapable of production. Imagine living in a run-down farmhouse without electricity or running water. Imagine life in Pope County in 1933. This description of everyday life of Pope County farmers is far from appealing and, indeed, the poor conditions that these people lived affected their lives as well as their farming. With little money, worn out fields, and dwindling numbers of livestock, there seemed to be little hope for the destitute farmers. It did not take the state of Illinois long to realize that the Pope County area was in dire need of help and guidance. With the establishment of Dixon Springs Experimental Station to help improve farmland and farming techniques, Pope County was able to not only overcome its poverty-stricken lifestyle but also become an important agricultural area in Illinois.

Life certainly was not easy for the average farmer in Pope County. There was little profit in food production even though it was so high priced, and many farmers lost their farms due to low prices. Homes were in poor repair and many times the only literature was the mail-order catalog and a copy of the local weekly paper. Little work was done on the farms and electric lines were not built in the rural areas; as a result there were few telephones. Highways were not even paved at this time; most driving was on narrow dirt roads. The conditions were so bad that even during the Great Depression many people were unaware of a major change. According to a history of the Dixon Springs Experimental Station, "Hardship had been the constant guest in many homes before [the Great Depression]" and it left a lasting mark on the life of the farmers. Many of the difficulties of the depression had increased because so many of the unemployed from the cities came to Pope County to raise their own food. This increase in the number of farms and in the farming population was most common in the poor, cheap areas where the land was "incapable of responding with any abundance to the rather feeble efforts, improper tillage and lack of attention to the fertility needs of the soil." In 1934 most of the families in the Dixon Springs area only had an annual income of about $300 or less, barely enough for a family to survive on. Much of the land was first utilized for lumber production since Pope County was once covered with hardwood forests. General farming was instated after the timber resources were used up and "lack of attention to the maintenance of soil productivity was accompanied by gradually declining yields of crops, reducing numbers of livestock and decreasing income." When the trees were gone and tillage disturbed the soil, the shallow layer of topsoil was soon eroded. Because of this erosion, the benefits of fertilizers were ineffective, resulting in unproductive yields and unmanageable fields. Because of this unintentional mismanagement, the fields grew into "a tangled mass of brush, briars, and sassafras and persimmon sprouts, the roots and fruits of which had very limited markets." The farming industry was in serious need of reform in order to bring Pope County citizens out of the rut they were living in.

The College of Agriculture of the University of Illinois first sought to establish an agricultural experiment station in southern Illinois in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The Forest Service of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Land Program Committee purchased large areas of forest and forest-type land in Southern Illinois, allowing the College of Agriculture to use some of the land as an experimental station. The experimental

station was proposed "for the study of soil erosion, reforestation, and livestock production into a system of farming involving the use of pastures and forage crops." A site was chosen north of Dixon Springs on Highway 146 near Glendale and Robbs. The area was named Dixon Springs Experimental Station and consisted of a total of 9,861 acres, which was purchased under the land-acquisition program.

The work done at Dixon Springs benefited the farmers immensely and allowed them to not only increase their yields, but also learn the best ways to produce their crops. Before the majority of the work was done, resettlement and rehabilitation organizations developed plans for the roads, land, and facilities. House designs were put together according to the number of people in the family, their ages, and the number of livestock they would receive. All the plans were made in consideration of topography, drainage, sanitation, and general access. Most of the planning and technical work had to be done by outside workers since the local people were not trained in this area. Instead, representatives from the University of Illinois determined the location of plots, houses, barns, roads, facilities for water, and design of the administration building. They decided that much of the fieldwork could be done with government surplus horses and four barns were then erected. The Soil Conservation Service built houses, laboratories, and devices to study run-off and soil losses on various slopes, and the influence of different tillage methods and vegetative soil covers on soil erosion. Gauges were set up to measure rainfall in relation to erosion and discovered that with good grass cover it would take up to 300 years to lose an inch of topsoil instead of the current ten. This began the process of improved soil management and led to the development and increased use of minimum-tillage methods for row crops. All of these methods as well as fertilization, pasture work, and cattle tests all taught the farmers ways in which they could improve their fields and learn the best ways to tend their crops.

Dixon Springs Experimental Station was the hope that Pope County needed. For the first time it allowed farmers to work under the guidance of people who knew some of the best farming techniques of the time. The various methods and techniques they were taught improved the fields, prevented erosion, increased cattle numbers, and overall improved the farmers' lives. It is hard to imagine how the Dixon Springs area would have gotten out of poverty without the experimental station and indeed, without it, it would not be the great agricultural area that it is today. [From *Dixon Springs,* http://www.ag.uiuc.edu/iaes.html (Aug. 28, 2003); *Dixon Springs Experimental Station,* http://www.cropsci.uiuc.edu/research/rds/dixonsprings/history.html (Aug. 28, 2003); *Pope County, Illinois History and Families 1816-1986;* W. Kammlade, P. Rexroat and H. Cate, *Redeeming a Lost Heritage The Development of the Dixon Springs Agricultural Center.]*